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AUTHOR Smith, Ron
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ABSTRACT

The origin and characteristics of an English course on classical mythology in Western art are described as a basis for suggestions about the use of art and music to accompany the study of mythology. Various versions of each myth are explored in the course. (AA)

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Ron Smith
Utah State University

BUT IT'S NOT IN THE MYTH!--
SOME IDEAS FOR COURSE AND UNIT DESIGN USING CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN THE ARTS

We're all thoroughly well acquainted with the myth of those two extraordinarily devoted lovers Orpheus and Eurydice. After all, who among English teachers can possibly not know about a common classical myth, and, even more important, who among human beings does not know about a man who literally went to Hell and back over the love of a woman? Like most truly heroic journeys, Orpheus's was the extreme of our own inadequate attempts at the heroic life--the utmost accomplishment in demonstration of the meanings and responsibilities of true love against which we must match the degrees of our own limitations as more human lovers and loved ones. The myth is a model, a behavioral paradigm, against which other great love stories may be judged on a rigid scale according to devotedness of the participants and against which we who profess to love must ultimately be judged. If Romeo and Juliet fare well in the comparison--or Antigone and Haemon, or Heloise and Abelard, or Tristan and Isolde--we may, too, for their accomplishments were marked by the limitations of more ordinary human-ness.

Yes, who among English teachers and/or human beings (two distinct categories according to some students) can possibly not know about Orpheus and Eurydice?

It's time for some further questions, though. Who among English teachers knows of an Orpheus who dotes on shepherdesses more than on Eurydice or of a Eurydice who is secretly seeing a beekeeper by the name of Aristaeus? Not too many, I'll bet, know that they're the lead characters in perhaps the funniest of all comic operas, Jacques Offenbach's Orpheus in the Underworld (Orphée aux Enfers) of the year 1858.

So much for the easy question. Who among English teachers knows of an Orpheus who at the start of a magnificent work reveals the depth of his grief in just

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four syllables as he stands at Eurydice's grave? Fewer yet will know this answer despite the work's acknowledged importance in the history of opera. This Orpheus is in Christoph Willibald Gluck's masterpiece, Orpheus and Eurydice (Orfeo ed Euridice), first performed in Vienna in 1762.

Yes, I know I'm playing "dirty pool" with you. You're an English teacher. Why should you be expected to know about music in any specialized way? I agree--to a certain extent only, though. What I'd like to convince you of is that in many courses you teach, you're missing out on some great opportunities for teaching if you don't already know about many of the relevant works of music that have been based on classical myth. Or, for that matter, about relevant paintings and sculptures, and most assuredly about works of fiction, drama, and poetry that are based on Greek and Roman myths. For almost ten years now, I've been using these works--successfully for the most part--and there's little doubt in my mind that you, too, can.

The most obvious place for myth-based works of art, literature, and music is the basic mythology course or unit. My own first experience in using them in the classroom and, I'm sure, the first experience of many other teachers as well, was in an introductory myth course. At the time, I focused heavily on Greco-Roman myth in that class, so it was only natural that I bring to the students' attention vivid evidence of the pervasiveness of the myths in Western Civilization--creative works based on them one among several ways of doing so. Well, that use of works of art, literature, and music got out of hand on me. I found the quest for more and more works so exciting and successful that the simple problem of logistics began overwhelming me. I mean, what does one do when so many myths have been so attractively adapted by creative people that virtually every class meeting means lugging both audio and visual equipment to and from class? One of my students recommended that since I was so willing to perform that single labor regularly, I really ought to try out others, like cleaning out some local stables or helping the people in Maryland get rid of their starlings. Right on, student! And besides, it was a fact that my

lesser course objective of exposing students to the ways in which classical myth has found its way into the signs, symbols, arts, and languages of the western world was quite surely, and rather quickly at that, pushing other objectives aside. By the time the little myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, for instance, had become in my classroom an extravaganza topped only by the filmic spectacles of Busby Berkeley--and surely, as I recall my efforts at coordinating the visual and musical, in need of his direction--I realized that what I'd done was create another course in the process of tinkering with the old one.

So, the course I've called "Classical Mythology in Western Art" was born. For six years it has been an upper division course and will, for the first time, be an upper division course in English instead of Honors during Spring Quarter 1977. In such a course the extravaganzas are quite in order since the primary objective is tied to the works of art, literature, and music based on classical myth. That objective is stated in this way:

> This course is designed principally to broaden students' knowledge of how and for what purposes myths of the Greeks and Romans have been employed in the arts of the western world. Beyond that, however, there will be two fringe benefits at least. In having the various arts represented in a single course, better understanding of art forms, their potentialities, and their limitations will be possible; and the repeated study comparatively of a number of works of art that have as their focus the same myth should produce some sense of the inter-relationship between the arts.

The objective and its "fringe benefits" are, I can assure you, rewarding to deal with and more than challenging to choreograph toward efficient realization.

Less venturesome souls than I usually am might understandably back off at this point--especially if the class is not to be team taught by experts in the several arts. It can be, of course, but I see no reason to clutter stage center with principals when after all is said and done the course is still a mythology course! Although I am unabashedly a lover of all the arts, I hardly qualify as more than an enthusiast where music and art are concerned. My students know it. My boss

knows it. Everybody knows it. What I attempt in the classroom is really no more nor less than is implied in the statement of course objective; the "fringe benefits" are, in effect, accidental results of a rather persistent concentration on relatively few myths. Let me explain briefly.

For students, the pleasures of "Classical Mythology in Western Art" are mostly related to the kinds of discovery--one on the heels of another all course long--that myth-based works tend to generate. With the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in mind, say, we might read Rainer Maria Rilke's "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes" (1904), Jean Cocteau's Orpheus (1926), and Jean Anouilh's Eurydice (1941)--all of them, that is. With them we might hear the two works mentioned earlier, Gluck's Orpheus and Eurydice and Offenbach's Orpheus in the Underworld, and also see slides of several works of art based on the myth. Each work is the creative artist's rendering of the myth anew--a new version with a new and different purpose--and as such it is like an overlay atop something all of us in the class are familiar with, the myth. Each aria, every literary twisting of the plot of the myth, or even the matter of where a painter chose in the myth to focus--all of these stand out conspicuously to students. Every new work approached is therefore an occasion for discovery that breeds, often enough without prompting, its own results. Not only do students see the malleability of myth in all of this, they start understanding how the separate art forms operate on the senses and how they are interrelated. Epiphanic occurrences of such sweeping importance are not likely, to my knowledge, in many other course contexts, so I take it as argument in favor of the course that they can and do happen in it. Yet it cannot be overemphasized that what must be taught about music, art, or literature in the course can range from almost nothing at all to whatever the teacher feels competent to attempt. It is, above all else, a mythology course.

It should go without saying that the numbers of possibilities for course content in "Classical Mythology in Western Art" are limited only by available materials. Here there is something of a problem, to be sure, but none that cannot

be solved with reasonable preparation ahead. Here, for example, is a list of what will be read, seen, and heard in the course Spring Quarter:

To Be Read:	Mary Renault's The Bull from the Sea
	Agatha Christie's The Labors of Hercules
	John Gardner's Jason and Medeia
	Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms and Mourning Becomes Electra
	G. B. Shaw's Pygmalion
	R. M. Rilke's "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes"
	Graham Hough's "Andromeda" and "Diana and Actaeon"
	Elizabeth Coatsworth's "Return" (on Odysseus)
	Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" and "Demeter and Persephone (In Enna)"
	A. D. Hope's "The Return of Persephone"
	Lucian's "Poseidon and Hermes"
To Be Seen:	Jean Anouilh's Antigone
	Sophocles' Oedipus Rex
	Jacques Offenbach's Orpheus in the Underworld
	Georges Auric's Phaedra (ballet)
	(plus about 150 slides of paintings and sculptures)
To Be Heard:	Lerner's and Loewe's My Fair Lady
	Igor Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex (opera-oratorio)
	Luigi Cherubini's Medea (opera)
	C. W. Gluck's Orpheus and Eurydice
	Franz Liszt's Orpheus (symphonic poem)

The list covers a great deal of territory.[1] First of all, and most important, it covers the range from very loose adaptation (My Fair Lady) to "tight" adaptation (Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, our primary source of the myth but an adaptation nonetheless). Second, there are works from many countries and time periods involved--something that opens up many avenues for discussion as might be imagined. Third, the three arts areas are well represented. Despite the scope of the list, though, it is significant to note that because of the numerous works based on just four myths--those of Orpheus and Eurydice, Jason and Medea, Theseus and Phaedra, and Oedipus-Antigone--the spread of myths isn't great at all. I assume of the students who enroll no knowledge of the myths, and for some the course will indeed be a first exposure to classical mythology.

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[1]For a sample syllabus of the course and related discussion of it, see my article entitled "An Arts-Centered Mythology Course" in Exercise Exchange, 17 (Spring 1973), 25-28.

Without doubt, the great obstacle to moving the course from drawing board to classroom is accumulation of recordings, films, and slides of paintings and sculptures. It takes time and is costly, a slow but substantial investment of both energy and money the only solution. With the cooperation of your theatre, television, and music people, budgetary help is a possibility, as are works chosen for performance as school dramas or for inclusion in musical programs. Additionally, development of lists of works to include in the course must be done selectively and is definitely an individual matter, what you feel most at ease with an obvious factor in what will end up on the lists. The most sensible way to go about creating the course, in the final analysis, is first to devote plenty of time--perhaps years--to the accumulation of works and knowledge about them.[2]

That leads us directly to what can be done with classical myth in the arts during the interim or permanently as a less ambitious approach to their classroom use.

When I said my use of works of art, literature, and music in the basic myth course got out of hand, I did not mean to discourage your use of them there. Far from it, in fact. There are many excellent works for use as illustration of myth in the arts. For instance, how about slides of paintings and sculptures that portray scenes from the "lives" of the Greek deities to illustrate your class discussions of them? For one thing, there's no better way of showing what "anthropomorphism" means, and when the paintings and sculptures are chosen with care, fidelity to the myth will be the case, thus eliminating any distracting need to deal with how, why, and for what purpose the artists altered the myth. Whole sequences of slides dealing with particular heroes and their adventures are another solid possibility--as are sequences dealing with many other myths or groups of them.

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[2]My A Guide to Post-Classical Works of Art, Literature, and Music Based on Myths of the Greeks and Romans (Logan, Utah, 1976) is meant to offer guidance to those who wish to go about collecting relevant works. It is available in two forms: through National Council of Teachers of English in a printed edition (Stock #19484) and through ERIC in microfiche (Accession #112 438, February 1976).

Then, too, there are sound benefits to be derived from building brief illustrative classroom segments around two or three art forms. As examples, I have found the following to be excellent as separate, reasonably short presentations during the course of a quarter in the basic myth course:

Selected portions of Handel's Apollo and Daphne (cantata)
Tiepolo's Daphne and Apollo (painting)
Bernini's Apollo and Daphne (sculpture)
Poussin's Apollo and Daphne (painting)
} Time used: roughly 20 min.

Selected portions of Boismortier's Diana and Actaeon (cantata)
Hough's Diana and Actaeon (poem)
Titian's Diana and Actaeon (painting)
Veronese's Diana and Actaeon (painting)
Carracci's Diana and Actaeon (painting)
} Time used: roughly 30 min.

Liszt's Orpheus (symphonic poem)
Ovid's Orpheus and Eurydice (poem)
Titian's Orpheus and Eurydice (painting)
Poussin's Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice (painting)
} Time used: roughly 25 min.

When singing is involved, have the portions of the libretto that pertain dittoed for students to use as they listen and watch. Where a poem must be read aloud, distribute dittoed copies of course, but also consider the possibility of making a tape recording with you yourself doing the reading over some of the music. If there's a radio-television facility at your school, a professional recording can be done; if not, a reasonable recording is possible with just a phonograph and tape recorder.[3]

Not only can such approaches work nicely in the introductory myth course, they can also be integrated neatly into other courses where works based on classical mythology are or can be assigned. Paintings, sculptures, and music can be brought into play in world literature courses, Renaissance literature surveys, introductory literature courses, and any number of others. When teaching Racine's Phaedra, for

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[3]By mid-1973, my own library of recordings and literary works had become adequate for a new adventure. I wrote, narrated, and recorded a series of eight hour-long radio programs under the general title Myths of the Greeks and Romans in Literature and Music. Since the original broadcast dates they have been kept on reserve in the school library for use by my students--mainly in connection with course projects.

example, why not introduce portions of Rameau's opera Hippolytus and Aricia? They are close enough together in time (1677 and 1733 respectively) to afford a mutually illuminating effect as concerns the music and literature of a single age. The same holds for Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis and Renaissance paintings on the same subject by the likes of Titian, Veronese, and Carracci.

Well, enough. There is little need for further examples since whatever the course or unit, what can be done should now be clear. Where any work of literature based on Greco-Roman myth is used in a class, teaching it from the myth upward--that is, having students know the myth first, then having them read the literary adaptation, and finally introducing the other art forms--can produce something like the same result I strive for in "Classical Mythology in Western Art." It is at the very moment that students say, with Pluto in Offenbach's Orpheus in the Underworld, "But it's not in the myth!," that they are on to something important--the creative artist's purpose at least and maybe even one of those elusive epiphanic discoveries concerning the arts generally.

Oh, how exciting it can be!

--Ron Smith
Utah State University